BEST PRACTICE OF LARP PROJECT MANAGEMENT – THE HANDOUT

This handout accompanies the Knudepunkt 2015 talk "Best Practice of LARP Project Management" and is a collection of advices and tools for project management of small-to-medium sized LARPs. All of these are subject to the context and is best used with an application of logic and common sense.

ADVICE #1 GENERAL

RESOURCES, SCOPE AND TIME ARE INTERLOCKED AND YOU CANNOT ADJUST ONE INDEPENDENT OF THE OTHERS

If you expand your ambitions, you need more time or more resources. If you lose resources, you need to scale down, if you have less time you need more resources or need to scale down. You get the picture. See Tool #1: The Steel Triangle for a more detailed explanation of this.

ADVICE #2 ORGANISATION

BIGGER PROJECT GROUP= HIGHER QUALITY, NOT LESS WORK

Any time saved by being more organizers to spread the workload between is spend on internal communication. However, any ideas and material generated will be reviewed and scrutinized more and better, increasing overall quality. See Tool #2: The three sizes of project groups to help decide on an optimum size.

ADVICE #3 ORGANISATION

CREATE YOUR ORGANIZATION BASED ON THE PEOPLE YOU HAVE

Do not create an ideal organization and then try to fit people in. Find the good people you want to work with and build your organization around their skills and interest – even if that gives somewhat crocked or thematically odd distribution of responsibility. You can be responsible for Facebook, breakfast and drivers schedules, without also having to be responsible for all PR, all food and all logistics.

ADVICE #4 ORGANISATION

CHOOSE TWO DIFFERENT PEOPLE TO BE PROJECT MANAGER AND TREASURER

Project Manager – or Main Organizer –is not a boss (as in "bossing other people around") but the first among equals selected to act as leader, manager and final arbitrator of disputes because all efficient groups needs a leader.
Treasurer is the person responsible for all financial matters and must be the only one who can authorize financial commitments of any kind. Responsibility and power must go hand-in-hand. It is crucial that this is two different people to avoid a concentration of power. Not (only) because power corrupts, but because two people are less likely to do something stupid on a whim than one.

ADVICE #5 NEW PEOPLE?

## IF YOU HAVEN'T WORKED TOGETHER BEFORE, GET TO UNDERSTAND EACH OTHERS MOTIVES FOR BEING INVOLVED

Motives and motivation is tightly interlocked, and organizers losing motivation have killed many a good LARP. Understanding the motives of your fellow organizers makes it easier to avoid problems with motivation and can clear out a lot of misunderstandings.
See Tool #3: Motives of larp organizers.

Advice #6 — New people?

IF YOU HAVEN'T WORKED TOGETHER BEFORE, CREATE A COOPERATION CONTRACT

The purpose of a cooperation contract is to align expectations of the organizers and agree on the how, who, when and what before the shit hits the fan.
To see an example of what should be included in a cooperation contract see Tool #4: Cooperation contract.

Advice #7 — Tasks

KEEP A TASK LIST, KEEP IT SIMPLE AND HAVE THE PROJECT MANAGER MANAGE IT

A task list should be digital, online and shared among the entire organizer group. For different suggestions see Tool #5: Task management tools.
It is crucial to keep it as simple and accessible as possible, so that it is used. At *most* it should be a list of tasks with descriptions, deadlines and a responsible person, but less is fine. See recommendations in Tool #2: The three sizes of project groups.
The project manager has the responsibility to follow up on tasks that are critical and make sure that the project group uses the task list so information in it is up-to-date and comprehensive.

Advice #8 — Tasks

ONLY ESTIMATE UNKNOWN, CRITICAL OR LATE TASKS, AND ALWAYS WITH A SOLID MARGIN

To do time-planning, you need to estimate time consumption of tasks. It is, however, adequate to estimate only certain tasks. This is task that you have never done before (they potentially contain nasty surprises), that are absolutely critical for the LARP (you don't want them to fail) and task that starts late in the project (because at that time, a small surprise is harder to accommodate).
For simple tools for estimation, see Tool #6: Estimation techniques.

Advice #9 — Tasks

START TASKS EARLY AND FINISH THEM LATE

The earlier you start, the earlier you will discover unforeseen dependencies and resource requirements. The later you finish, the less you will have to go back and change due to changes elsewhere in the project.

Advice #10 — Execution

CREATE A BUDGET, REVISE IT AND PERFORM FOLLOW-UP REGULARLY

All LARP projects need a financial plan called a budget. As any plan this will change as the project progresses and as such it will need revisions. To see if you actually follow your plan, you need to post expenses and income, and compare them to the project as well as project the final result.
All of the above is the domain of the Treasurer. For a simple explanation of how to do this, see Tool #7: Basic financial management.

Advice #11 — Execution

CREATE A CASH FLOW BUDGET

A cash flow budget is a plan to ensure, that you have the cash to pay your bills when they're due. If you don't make a cash flow budget you might end up not being able to purchase the items you need, when you need them.

CREATE AND USE AN EXECUTION PLAN

ADVICE #12
EXECUTION

An execution plan is document including all the information needed to keep an overview of the LARP from execution start to finish and handle the most common unforeseen events. An example of what is included in an execution plan can be found in Tool #8: Execution plan.

AGREE ON FREQUENCY, LOCATION AND FORMALITY OF MEETINGS

ADVICE #13
INT. COMM.

All projects eventually have meetings, but people have very different opinions on what that entails. Aligning expectations about this will greatly reduce the possibility of disagreements and conflicts later on. You should decide on how often, what are probable and acceptable venues, if you need an agenda, if you need preparation and any requirements to participation. You do not have to put this in writing, but if you have a cooperation contract, this agreement should be included therein.

AGREE ON PRIMARY CHANNEL OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN MEETINGS

ADVICE #14
INT. COMM.

In between meetings, you will also need to communicate effectively within the entire project group, but people have many different preferences and habit. To agree on one primary channel of communication greatly reduces the chance of anybody missing vital information. As for meetings you do not have to put it in writing but it should be included in any cooperation contract.

DECIDE ON A FILE-SHARING METHODOLOGY

ADVICE #15
INT. COMM.

All LARP projects generate a number of digital files which needs to be shared effectively among project members, and hence a unified file sharing methodology should be agreed and all should be obliged to place all project-relevant files in there. In Tool #9: File sharing methodologies there is a description of tools and possible ways to structure this.

DECIDE ON A CHANNEL FOR INBOUND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

ADVICE #16
EXT. COMM.

It is important to have only one channel for inbound communication. That channel must be easily accessible for all organizers so everybody is equally informed and must be in writing, making it possible to search through past communication. If you have multiple channels, channels only accessible to some organizers or a lot of oral communication, misunderstandings and confusion will arise.
Email is a preferred option but ticket-handling systems or a facebook-page account are viable alternatives.

AGREE WHO HAS EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION RIGHTS

ADVICE #17
EXT. COMM.

To avoid confusion, it is important that it is agreed who in the organizer groups has the mandate to communication about certain topics externally. Also it should be agreed who is the backstop that will respond to anything that does not fall into other categories, this is usually the project manager.

TOOL #1: THE STEEL TRIANGLE

The Steel triangle is so named, because it is unyielding. If you adjust one corner of the triangle, you need to adjust the others accordingly to make the project work.

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                    Scope

        ↖                    ↗

Resources    ⟷    Time
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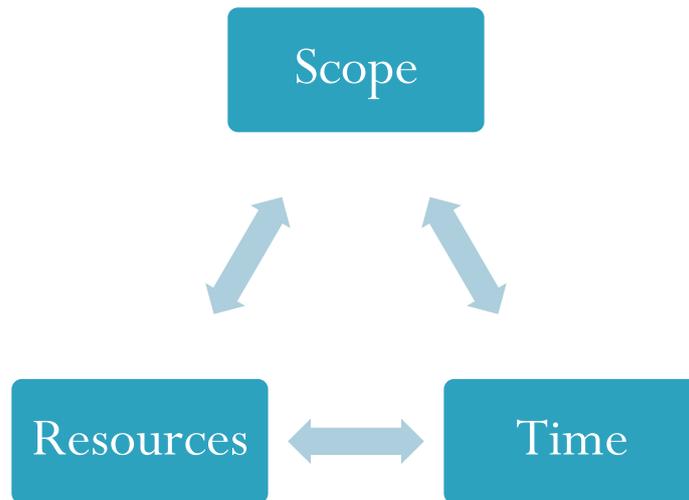
- **Scope** is what you're trying to create, it is your product, your deliverable – in short, the game itself and all its byproducts.
- **Time** is your timeframe – the days, weeks and months you have to work with.
- **Resources** are your money, your (free/volunteer) work and your social relations.

It is a powerful and simple model for illustrating the interdependencies of any project if people accept the basic premise, that changing any one of these factors will require modification of one or both of the others.

There are especially two situations where this tool is useful. The first is to explain to people outside the project group, what consequences changes have for the project and include them in the decision process. So if players ask why you can't write characters for all players you can show them this model, explain that this will mean a huge increase in scope and ask, if they either will give you considerable more time to do the work, pay more to participate (then you can "buy" the character-writers working time), if they can find good volunteer help to do it, or if they have friends that can assist. Most people who do not understand the workings of a project understand this dilemma.

The second case is to help your project group to prioritize when changes are made in the project. So, if you find, that you lost an organizer from the group, you can ask how to handle that and the model will illustrate that you can either increase your available working time, decrease the scope (remove tasks), find other volunteer assistance or try to get help from your friends. It is all pretty basic, but the certainty that this is the sum of all your possible solutions saves you a lot of time.

TOOL #2: THE THREE SIZES OF PROJECT GROUPS

Project groups basically come in three different sizes and corresponding benefits and disadvantages as illustrated below. You will do well to consider this when forming your project group.

	1 person	2 persons	3+ persons
Name	An organizer	An organizer group	A big organizer group
Internal communication	Nothing	Whenever you do internal communication, everybody is informed	Internal communication might only reach a portion of the organizers, creating confusion and

	1 person	2 persons	3+ persons
			misunderstandings
Managing tasks	Have a task list	Have a task list with a responsible person for each task	Have a task list with deadlines and responsible person for each task
Quality control and feedback	Requires outside assistance	Dialogue and discussions	Dialogue and discussions, risk of endless revisions

TOOL #3: MOTIVES OF LARP ORGANIZERS

Motives and motivation is tightly inter-woven. Understanding other organizers motives can either be done through (hopefully) clever deduction or through open discussion. The problem about open discussion is that some motives are not considered legitimate and hence people might lie (to themselves as well as you).

I have identified the following motives (from "What fuel do you use", Solmukohta 2008) with a short description of each, what tasks will increase motivation and what to be aware of with people, primarily motivated by that specific motivation.

Motivation	Description	Good tasks	Beware of
Power	The desire to shape or influence a process or people.	Anything with influence over decisions and/or other people	They might not care much about the end result and/or the other organizers
Social	Obligations towards friends, "doing a favour"	Any ehere they work closely with the people they have social obligations towards	Their engagement is tied to other organizers and if they lose interest, so might the socially motivated
Fame	The wish to become known (for something good)	Anything involving a great deal external communication	They might claim credit for work that was done by somebody else of collectively, which might annoy others
C.V.	To gain credentials for Cirriculum Vitae	Whatever they want to have on their C.V.	They just need it to look good on paper so there might be a lot of important "details" they don't care about
XP	Interested in learning a new skill or perfect and existing	Whatever they want to learn or perfect	They might not possess the skills to carry out the tasks they want to do or they might want to experiment excessively
Prove oneself	To demonstrate to oneself the ability to carry out specific tasks	Whatever they want to prove. If that is nothing specific then whatever will give them success	Might not possess the skills to do this.
Urge to create	The urge to create something to be proud of	Where they can generate ideas and/or mature them	Might want to decide a lot of things and can lose interest, if opposed to much on the creative side.

It is not necessarily a good idea to give people the tasks described above because as while they might feel very motivated, they might not possess the right skills or it might be hampering the cooperation in the project group. If there is no good match between a person's interests, skills and motivation you should reconsider working with that person.

If you go through with an open discussion of motives, you could enter your findings in the cooperation contract.

TOOL #4: COOPERATION CONTRACT

A cooperation contract is a document that describes how the project group wants to work together. While having a written document might prove useful in case of conflicts, the important part is the process of discussion of the contents so all organizers are aligned on the "how do we want to work together"-part.

A cooperation contract could include:

- Agreements on meetings; frequency, location, formality, responsibilities, preparations, etc.
- Agreements on internal and external communication
- Obligations and tasks for all organizers
- For each organizer, a list of other engagements that are prioritized higher than this project

TOOL #5: TASK MANAGEMENT TOOLS

Task management can be done in a lot of different tools.

Notepad: For the simple, one-organizer project a list in notepad is usually sufficient. This might be less so when more than one person is involved.

Excel: A spreadsheet can include a list of tasks in a structured manner.

Podio: Web-based tool Podio (podio.com) is a simple, free customizable project-management tool where you can manage tasks and a whole lot of other things. It might be a good idea to remove a lot of the functionality to keep it simple. You also have history on what has been done and the ability to inform people by email about new tasks, etc.

There are loads of free, webbased project-management tools available. Be wary, that many of them build on a specific work-methodologies or might be more complex to use, because of added functionality. When in doubt, go for a simpler solution.

TOOL #6: ESTIMATION TECHNIQUES

Estimation is a classic project management discipline and for this reason there are loads of tools on how to handle this. I will present four classics that I like to use from very simple to mathematical

Analogy is simple, quick but heavily experienced-based. You rummage through your "chest of experience" to find the task that most resembles what you are about to do, and then think back on how long that took. Then you compare differences in try to adjust the estimate accordingly. This technique closely resembles what most people would do when asked to estimate a task.

The **Delphi-technique** is based on a panel of experienced experts – ideally 3 or more. You describe the task to all the experts who individually make an estimate (probably based on the Analogy approach above) and when all have done so, they compare estimates. The proponent of the highest and lowest

estimate argue their case and all create new estimates, based on the arguments proposed. This continues until an agreement is reached. It is somewhat timeconsuming but is much more thorough than the Analogy approach.

The **Fermi estimate** – also known as the back-of-the-envelope estimate – is a simple methodology to estimate anything with very little data and some simple multiplication. You break down the task in manageable chunks that can be multiplied to give the final estimate. Even if they all are a little off, chances are, that they are off in different directions in which case it would even out in the end. For a good example of how to use this, see "Fermi problem" on Wikipedia.

Finally, **3-point estimation** is a more mathematical approach. You create three estimates for your task; an optimistic estimate (everything goes according to plan, all involved knows what they are doing, etc.) a realistic estimate (as above but with some problems, somebody involves lacks necessary skills, etc.) and a pessimistic estimate (things go horribly wrong, crucial skills are lacking, etc.).

You then calcaulate mean and standard deviation (σ) as:

$$Mean = \frac{Optimistic + Pessimistic + (3 \times Realistic)}{5}$$

$$\sigma = \frac{Pessimistic - Optimistic}{5}$$

Mathematically speaking, you then know that the likelihood of being done after Mean + σ is 84 %, after Mean + 2σ is 97,5 % and Mean + 3σ is 99,5 %. Depending on how high a margin you want you can then choose how many times you want to add the standard deviation.

Personally, I would recommend using the Delphi-technique where possible, but Analogy will work fine in many cases.

As you might have noticed, these models build upon experience or knowledge, both which can be a little hard to come by when you are organizing for the first time. In that case seeking assistance from somebody with experience might prove useful. However, both Fermi-estimate and Analogy can draw from experiences outside LARP-organizing and might assist you.

Finally – and maybe most importantly of all – when in doubt, increase your estimate. When somewhat certain, increase your estimate. Heck, when totally certain, still increase your estimate. My professional experience with estimates – my own as well as countless colleagues – is that there is a 1-to-10 ratio (or worse!) between estimates that are too high, and estimates that are too low. I reason that this is mainly caused by the human inability to intuitively grasp statistics and probability but in any case, increasing your estimate is always a safe bet.

TOOL #7: BASIC FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

A budget is a financial plan which is usually created and maintained in a spreadsheet like Excel. I will not go into detail about the individual posts or the process of creating a budget here, as it is a topic unto itself. I will go into the follow-up and revision of budgets, though.

For each post in your budget, you should have four numbers:

The **Original budget** describes the budget figure you started out with and have agreed between yourself, any external parties, etc. This should never be changed during the project as you will use that to compare your current situation to your initial plan.

The **Current budget** is your current budget figure. Initially this is the same as the Original budget, but as you change plans in the project, you financial plans (your budget) follows along, and this should reflect

this. This is the figure you are currently aiming at. Changing this, should only be done by the Treasurer and by agreement in the organizer group.

You **Realized** value is your current expense or income figure on a given post. This reflects all payments received and given from the project. Based on this you can calculate how far you are into your project, financially speaking, which is good figure to have. This figure will change whenever any financial transaction occurs against the project.

Finally, your **Forecast** is current expectations for the financial end result. This is maintained by the Treasurer either manually by entering this whenever entering new financial transactions or by assigning a "percentage complete" to each post and by that method, calculating a forecast value. The Forecast should normally be compared against your Current budget to be aware, if you are on track or not. Comparing these will tell you if you have excess funds you can channel into improvements in the project or if you will be pressed financially, causing you to take correcting actions before it is too late.

An example of such a budget can be seen below where a "% complete" figure is used to calculate the forecast.

	Original budget	Current Budget	Realized	% comp.	Forecast
Income					
Participation fee	137.000,00	132.000,00	87.858,50	65%	135.166,92
Party	25.000,00	12.000,00	-	0%	12.000,00
Income total	162.000,00	144.000,00	87.858,50	60%	147.166,92
Expenses					
Food	-65.000,00	-63.500,00	-	0%	-63.500,00
Transport	-14.500,00	-14.000,00	-	0%	-14.000,00
PR	-2.400,00	-3.000,00	-2.105,20	100%	-2.105,20
Organization	-10.500,00	-12.500,00	-1.950,13	19%	-10.440,99
Location	-24.500,00	-24.000,00	-	0%	-24.000,00
Props	-25.000,00	-13.000,00	-1.934,35	11%	-17.585,00
Reserves	-16.200,00	-14.400,00	-	0%	-14.400,00
Expenses total	-158.100,00	-144.400,00	-5.989,68	5%	-146.031,19
Total	3.900,00	-400,00	81.868,82	32%	1.135,73

A cash flow budget is made by plotting the expected income and expenses on a timeline and examine any times where the sum of income and expenses are negative – this is cash deficit that has to be handled by loans. A loan doesn't necessarily mean involving a bank; small amounts might be loaned from any relevant organizations in the area or the organizers themselves. Remember that a loan always carries a risk and anybody taking risk, usually wants something in return.

In most cases it is acceptable to just plot the major expenses and incomes, but if the budget is tight or it is known that some income will be late in the project, more details might be necessary.

An example of a cash flow budget – illustrated graphically – is shown below. Notice that early in the project there is a large period with a cash deficit and again late in the project as a large grant is not being paid until after the LARP has been held and properly documented.

Cash flow
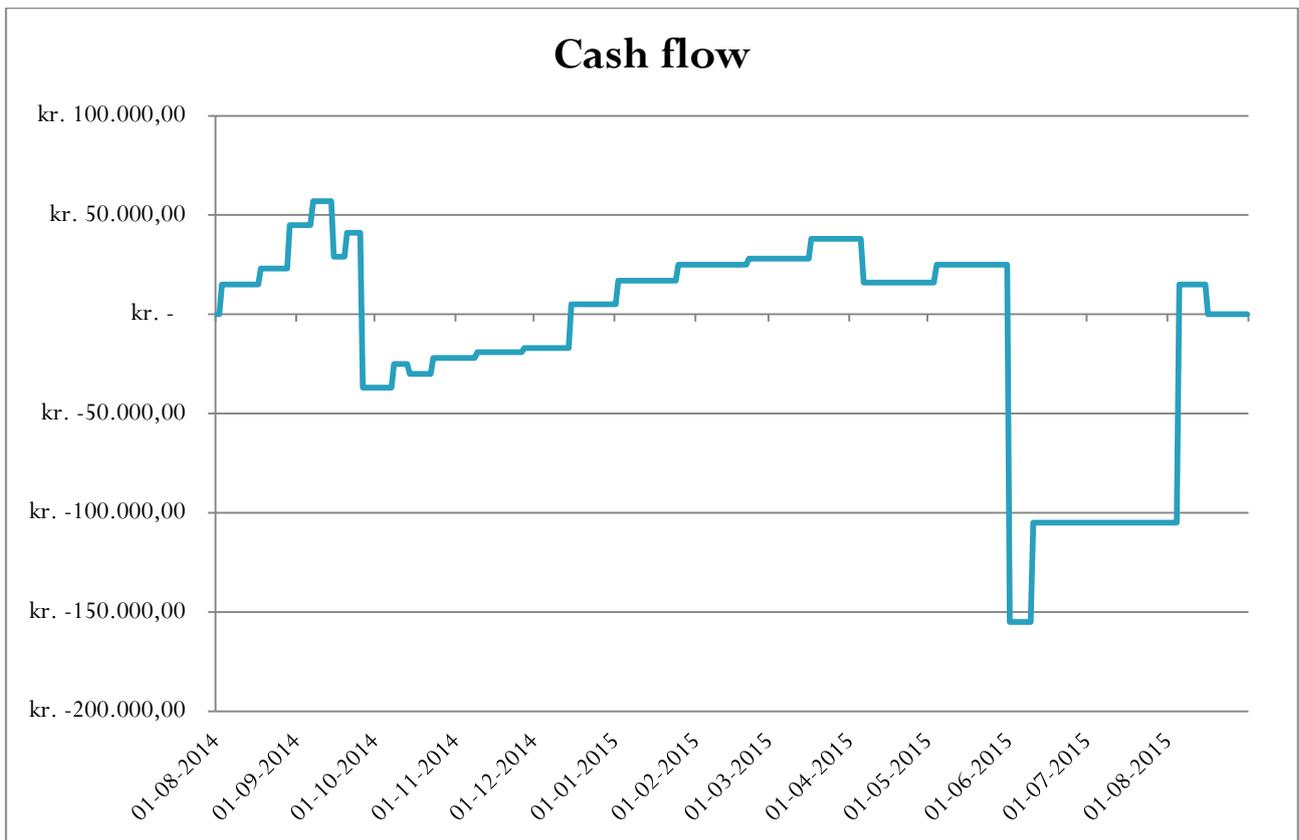
TOOL #8: EXECUTION PLAN

An execution plan is a document listing all the information needed to execute the larp from arriving on location and until leaving. This includes information such as:

- Contact information on suppliers, landlords, organizers, assistants and others you might need to contact – and information of distribution of responsibilities between these people
- A timeschedule listing the timing of all important tasks and events - logistical as well as game-relevant.
- Information of any special arrangements any players might have with the organizers
- What to do in case of emergencies; medical, fire etc.
- Any rules and regulations that assistants and organizers need to know
- Any information needed regarding food and drink
- Map of the area with all important locations marked and described
- Anything else you might think is needed to execute the larp.

The execution plan should be distributed to all organizers and assistants – the more that knows, the better.

An excerpt from a timeschedule for Krigslive IX can be seen below (in Danish, with headings translated to English):

WEDNESDAY THE 24TH OF APRIL

BEFORE NOON: UNTIL 12.00

Time	Task	Responsible
07.00	Køre fra Aalborg	
	Aflæsse ting ved Arrangørbunker	
	Indrette arrangørbunker så den er let overskuelig	Jens
10.00	Fjerne hegn på vej ind til mørkegoblin lejr	Kogle
10.00	Fjerne hegn på vej ind til den kejserlige lejr	Kåre
10.30	Bygge bro til mørkegoblin lejr	Kogle
	Købe mad i superbrugsen til opsætningsfolk. Pålæg, frugt, brød, slik, sodavand. Placeres i køletaske i arrangørbunkeren.	Kåre
	Afmærke march-ruterne med farvede flag	Kåre + kogle
	Afmærke knudepunkterne med bogstaver	Kåre + kogle
	Klargøre affaldsconatiner; Sikre den er åben, tilgænglig og klar til brug.	Jens
	Åbne for vandet ved formuldingstoilettet + montere slange	Jens

AFTERNOON: BETWEEN 12.00 AND 18.00

Time	Task	Responsible
13.00	Hente ting i containerne i Dorf. Husk nøglen til containerne	Kåre
	Klargøre parkeringsplads	Jens
	Afmærke lejrpladser i kejserlig lejr I det omfang det er muligt designere hvor de forskellige enheder skal bo.	Kogle
	Afmærke lejrpladser i mørkegoblin lejr I det omfang det er muligt designere hvor de forskellige enheder skal bo. Her drejer det sig særligt om at sikre, at der er skelnen mellem de mest offgame og mest ingame dele af lejren.	Jens
	Samle sminke-station til mørkegoblinerne	Jens
	Fylde vand i vanddunke og fragte til kejserlig lejr	Kogle
	Sikre, at brænde er let tilgængeligt fra de to lejre	Jens

EVENING: AFTER 18.00

Time	Task	Responsible
	Hænge "toiletsedler" op på toiletterne	Kåre

TOOL #9: FILE SHARING METHODOLOGIES

There are many different tools for sharing files, and I have tried a fair few of them. Currently my recommendations go to Dropbox (dropbox.com) which is cross-platform, easy to use and install, has good synchronization features and a lot of other stuff going for it, I will not point out here.

You will also need to create a folder structure and enforce that. That structure should make it easy to find stuff and encourage everybody to store everything in there. Below I have described the base structure I have used for the last couple of projects and that seems to work for us:

Folder name	Contents and usage
Administration	All planning and managing documents; project descriptions, task lists, etc. Usually the fall-back if nothing else fits.
Homepage	Texts, graphics, etc. for the homepage.
Logistics	All documents used in the planning and execution of logistics.
Notes and ideas	In here, each organizer has his or her own folder for random notes and ideas. Anything that is not fully finished can be placed in here to ensure, that nothing ever gets lost and that everybody has copies of everything. It also means that the other organizers can sneak a peak, but in my experience, that is an advantage, not a disadvantage
PR	All material used to advertise the LARP.
Game design	All documents related to game design; world descriptions, written characters, in-game laws, etc. Everything that relates to the game design side of the LARP.
Player contact	Management of player contact; up-to-date list of sign-up players and any notes for any signup, letters sent to the players, etc.
Finances	Budgets and contracts with financial impact. Receipts, if electronic, should also be stored here.